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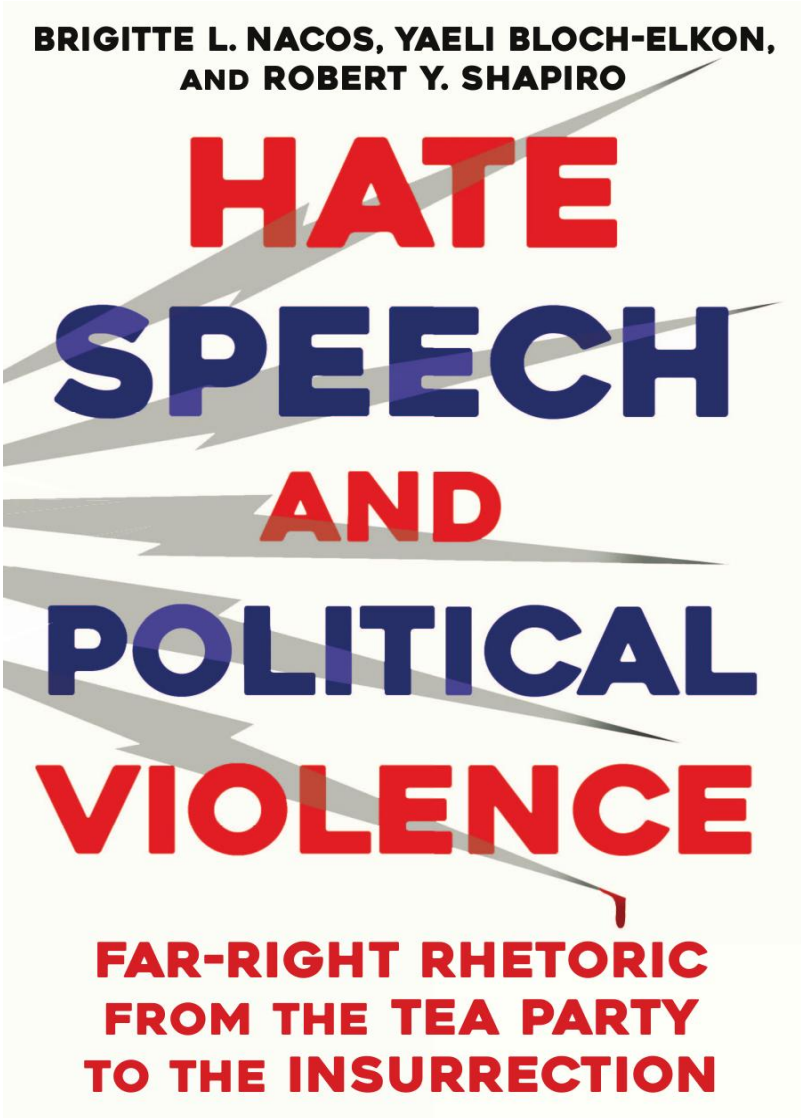


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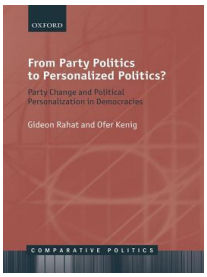


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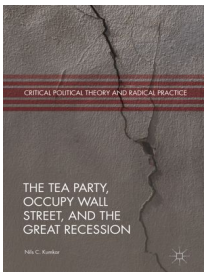


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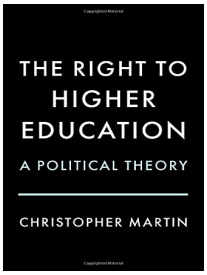

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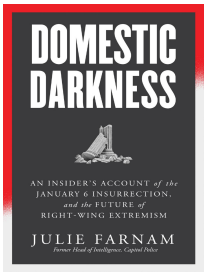


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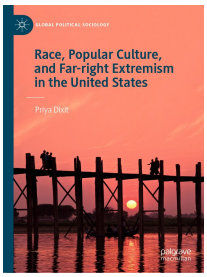


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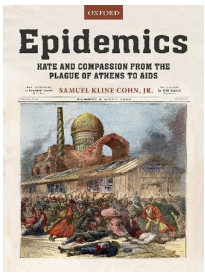


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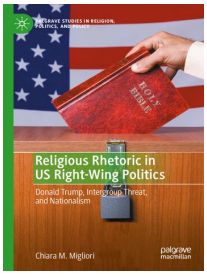

BRIGITTE L. NACOS, YAELI BLOCH-ELKON, AND ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO

# HATE SPEECH AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

## FAR-RIGHT RHETORIC FROM THE TEA PARTY TO THE INSURRECTION

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BRIGITTE L. NACOS,
YAELI BLOCH-ELKON, AND
ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO

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# PREFACE

This project began with the goal of examining partisan conflict and the role of the new online as well as traditional offline media in the rise of the Tea Party. We then expanded the research as events unfolded in the rise of Donald Trump and his Make American Great Again (MAGA) movement. Trump had won a great deal of respect and support among Tea Partiers when he made himself the voice of the anti-Obama conspiracy theories. Eventually, in Trump's own words, the Tea Party movement became Make America Great Again. Further, we recognized early on that the angry and often violent rhetoric of Tea Partiers was similar to Trump's and the hate speech of his supporters. We thought the results of the 2016 presidential election would put a damper on that rhetoric. We were wrong. Therefore, the book extends the story and our analysis through Trump's presidency and the 2020 election and its aftermath.

The main argument and general theorizing of the book concerns how communication became weaponized when the Tea Party, a reactionary social movement, quickly appeared and strengthened with the assistance of media insiders, GOP leaders, and conservative advocacy groups just months after Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States,

entered the White House. We argue that what we call the "interconnectivity of political communication" facilitated and even promoted the Tea Party during its first years along with anti-Obama conspiracy theories that were embraced by its supporters. The rumor that Obama was not born in the United States and therefore an illegitimate president became part of a toxic communication spiral when the reality TV star and entrepreneur Donald Trump made himself the public spokesperson of the "birther" lies. We examine how such weaponized communication—and the partisan conflict of which it was a part—played out in the tumultuous years that followed and ultimately led to the violence of the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol as a move toward overturning Trump's defeat in the 2020 election. The book provides a chronicle of the increasing level of partisan conflict and weaponized communication from the Tea Party to Trump and the political violence that ensued. As a result, what transpired has put American democracy at risk. As we discuss in the first chapter, other works have examined different aspects of these issues, but we offer a distinctive account that emphasizes the links between the Tea Party and the Trumpian MAGA movement.

This book has taken a while to complete. We owe great thanks to many individuals and institutions. We—especially Shapiro and Nacos—have been supported in many ways by Columbia University's School of Arts and Sciences, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy (ISERP), the Department of Political Science, and the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). Bloch-Elkon is also grateful to the Bar Ilan University's Dean's Office of Social Sciences and the School of Communication.

For comments and very constructive criticism of earlier versions of the manuscript, we thank Lance Bennett, Larry Jacobs, Ben Page, and the anonymous reviewers who helped us improve the book immensely. At Columbia University Press, Stephen Wesley provided terrific support and especially assisted in moving quickly to publication once we completed our revisions. We owe special thanks to Ben Kolstad as our superb project manager and to Lois Smith for excellent copy-editing. We also thank Christian Winting, Marielle Poss, and ARC Indexing.

Many individuals provided direct assistance as well as organizational and logistical support. First, we thank the following former students for their able and important research assistance at various stages of our research and writing: Isaac Horwitz-Hirsch, Min Guo, Sidney Wiswell, Julia Cosgrove, Esterah Brown, Julia Schreder, Sayali Nagwekar, Helena Felsen-Parsons, David Anderson, Yu-Tung Tsai, Kristen Gonzalez, William Parish, Sunpreet Singh, Wilfred Chan, Daran Dooley, Adam Hyams, Tyler Trumbach, Ella Cheng, Emma Cheng, Vivian Tsai, Amber Tong Gao, Dan Louis, Sarah Kuranga, Rekha Kennedy, and Sam Frederick. At the manuscript's final stage, Eun Ji Sally Son provided capable assistance.

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We could not have written this book without the mass media and public opinion data and other evidence available to us and to which we refer in the chapters, figures, and tables. We want to draw special attention to the many public opinion survey sponsors and polling organizations responsible for the extensive data that we have available today. We acknowledge the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research and its iPOLL database, which has been our go-to source for much national public opinion survey data. In particular, we have reported on our analyses of public opinion data from the NORC General Social Survey, the Pew Research Center, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and Gallup. We have benefited from communications about these data from colleagues at these respective organizations: Tom Smith, Rene Bautiste, Claudia Deane, Dina Smeltz, and Frank Newport.

Our greatest and warmest thanks go to our families, with whom we endured living and working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brigitte is most thankful for the support, feedback, and encouragement of her late husband, Jimmy, during the early years of our project. Today, he

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would share our concerns about the increase in partisan hostility, hate speech, and domestic political violence that threaten America's democracy he hoped our children and grandchildren would inherit.

Bob thanks his wife, Nancy Rubenstein, whom he once again gives credit for contributing to our debate about the title of the book (she came up with the title of our first book). She also, with good cheer and for too many months, left him alone at the computer and with his stacks of books and papers.

Yaeli is most grateful to her daughters, Liya and Neta Elkon, who were continuously supportive and understanding of their mother's involvement in this project, as they left their childhood behind and have been growing into beautiful young adults. Most important, along the way, they have learned a lot about precious democratic values and threats to democracy.

We owe our families big time. They helped make the book all the better for us, along with the others whom we have been so pleased to acknowledge. As always, full responsibility for all the deficiencies and shortcomings of our work, which now includes this book, is ours alone.

# HATE SPEECH AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

# 1

# INTRODUCTION

## From the Tea Party and Donald Trump's MAGA Extremism to January 2021

Meteorologists predicted nothing unusual for Wednesday, January 6, 2021, in the Washington, DC, area. But apart from normal winter temperatures, there was nothing normal about that day. The "Save America" rally at the Ellipse near the White House, organized by activists in the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement created by Republican president Donald Trump, turned into a breach of the U.S. Capitol and a violent attempt to prevent the certification of Joe Biden's election victory by members of Congress and Vice President Mike Pence. Republican senator Mitt Romney characterized the event as "an insurrection incited by the President of the United States."[1] Indeed, in the weeks before the attack, President Trump claimed falsely that he had won reelection in a landslide. He used his Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump, and public appearances multiple times to urge supporters to "Stop the Steal" of the election by the Democrats. For example, on December 19 he tweeted, "Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election. Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild." On January 1, he used his Twitter account to mobilize his followers: "The BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C., will take place at 11:00 A.M. on January 6th. Locational details to follow. StopTheSteal!"

During a January 4 rally in Georgia ahead of two special elections for the U.S. Senate, Trump grandstanded: "If the liberal Democrats take the Senate and the White House—and they're not taking this White House—we're going to fight like hell, I'll tell you right now . . . We're going to take it back."[2]

At the January 6 rally, Trump began his seventy-three-minute speech with an attack on the mainstream media and Big Tech (the largest and dominant technology companies and their involvement in mass and targeted communication)—although both reported on or carried his propaganda day in and day out before and after he became president. He shouted, "We have hundreds of thousands of people here and I just want them to be recognized by the fake news media. Turn your cameras please and show what's really happening out here because these people are not going to take it any longer. It would be really great if we could be covered fairly by the media. The media is the biggest problem we have as far as I'm concerned, single biggest problem. The fake news and the Big Tech." A few minutes later, Trump piled on, "We don't have a free and fair press. Our media is not free, it's not fair. It suppresses thought, it suppresses speech and it's become the enemy of the people. It's become the enemy of the people."[3]

Trump repeated his tale of a huge election victory twice during this speech. "We won in a landslide. This was a landslide," he claimed. Getting to the very reason for this rally, he urged the crowd to act: "Now, it is up to Congress to confront this egregious assault on our democracy. And after this, we're going to walk down, and I'll be there with you, we're going to walk down, we're going to walk down. . . . Because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong. We have come to demand that Congress do the right thing and only count the electors who have been lawfully slated, lawfully slated."[4]

During his candidacy and presidency, Trump's relentless salvos of weaponized communication became the dominant feature of his political rhetoric.[5] The term "weaponized rhetoric, speech, or communication" is used here in reference to the content of spoken and written messages conveyed at public events or through various media with the goal of demonizing political opponents and societal "out-groups." Trump's populist vernacular of hate and division grew even sharper after he lost the November 2020

presidential election. On January 6, his language whipped the already combative crowd into a fury. Obviously perceiving their leader's attack speech as a call to arms, his supporters—among them well-organized and well-trained white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and antigovernment groups—invaded congressional buildings hunting for the "enemies" of the president and his supporters. Contrary to his promise, Trump did not join the crowd that moved furiously toward the Capitol. Instead, he watched the live TV coverage of the attack from the White House without making any effort to stop the rampage. He enjoyed watching his devoted supporters in MAGA hats who carried Trump banners and Confederate flags, used the poles of U.S. flags as weapons against Capitol police officers, and shouted "Hang Mike Pence."[6] Later, when Capitol and Metropolitan police, with the assistance of National Guard units, had secured congressional buildings, President Trump tweeted, "These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!"

Like supporters of the Tea Party movement a decade earlier, Trump and his most fervent followers launched their weaponized speech against anyone who was not loyal to the MAGA movement's leader. They did this regularly and in plain view. Nonfactual statements and foolish conspiracy theories were no longer spread merely among fringe groups but became part of mainstream politics. Trump's tweets about "rigged" election results and his declaration of love for "great patriots" who had maimed police officers and threatened the lives of vice President Pence, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and others were shocking displays of the most horrific consequence of his and his supporters' dangerous propaganda. As Timothy Snyder warned, "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom."[7]

How did the United States of America, the oldest continuous democracy, arrive at such a dangerous junction? Years of rising partisan conflict, the mass media's amplification of the Tea Party movement, and their embrace of anti-Obama conspiracy theories were crucial building blocks in the rise of Donald Trump. In 2019, President Trump told an interviewer, "The Tea Party was a very important event in the history of our country.

And those people are still there. They haven't changed their views. The Tea Party still exists—except now it is called Make America Great Again."[8] Trump was well aware that Tea Partiers along with Protestant evangelicals, many of whom were sympathizers of the Tea Party movement, composed the core of his political base from the moment he became the most prominent public advocate of the racism-driven anti-Obama birther conspiracy theory. The importance of the Tea Party in Trump's political scheme was crystal clear when he announced his run for the presidency with a laundry list of grievances and promises that mirrored the Tea Party's racist and nativist agenda.[9] Most important, as Trump became the leader of what was, in effect, a merging of the Tea Party and Make America Great Again (MAGA) movements, his aggressive rhetoric and outright hate speech helped to increase the existing political divisions to the level of hyperpolarization.

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEA PARTY, ANTI-OBAMA CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND THE RISE OF TRUMP

A multitude of books and articles have been published about one or another aspect of the Tea Party movement, the rise of Donald Trump, partisan conflict, and the role of the mass media and social media. The first scholarly books devoted to the Tea Party were authored by the historian Jill Lepore, the law professor Elizabeth Price Foley, and the political scientists Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson. All three volumes contribute to our understanding of the formative period of the Tea Party. In a fascinating account, Lepore compares the modern Tea Party and its obsession with the American Revolution, the Constitution, and originalism to the 1770s and 1780s, concluding that the Tea Party's "originalism has slipped into fundamentalism."[10] Conversely, Foley praises the Tea Party's principles of limited government, U.S. sovereignty, and constitutional originalism.[11] Skocpol and Williamson offer a balanced and comprehensive analysis of the early

Tea Party's organizations, ideologies, and rank-and-file members; its early effects on the Republican Party; and its ability to get significant amounts of news coverage. Notably, these two authors recognize that in the earliest stage of the Tea Party the movement's activists were "right-wingers in the GOP orbit," including antigovernment extremists, among them militia groups such as the Oath Keepers, who would years later play a central role in the storming of the U.S. Capitol.[12] Parker and Barreto interpreted the Tea Party movement's early embrace and spreading of anti-Obama conspiracy theories as signs of their white members' fears about changes in their country that they perceived to be harmful to them.[13]

There is a rich literature describing one or another aspect of Tea Party propaganda, online sites, and communities; the role of cable networks; the mainstream media's news coverage; and the danger of weaponized communication at the disposal of strongmen leaders.[14]

There is also important, scholarly research that has considered social movements and contentious politics in the context of changes that have come with twenty-first-century information and communication technology. Before the breakthrough of social media as major communication vehicles, Yochai Benkler in his pioneering book, *The Wealth of Networks*, recognized, analyzed, and applied the transformation from an "industrial information economy" to a "networked information economy" that has allowed "cooperative and coordinated action carried out through a radically distributed, non-market mechanism that does not depend on proprietary strategies."[15] With the breakthrough of social media, however, Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts show, in a further pioneering way, that these media did not dominate political communication. Rather, a strong one-sided ("asymmetric") communication sphere—"network propaganda"—on the political right emerged that substantially included existing media along with social media.[16] Social media—and its pathologies—was hardly the only influence on political discourse and was not the dominant force in the early 2020s.[17] Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston emphasize aptly that this new oppositional partisan sphere disrupted basic principles and institutions of American democracy.[18] A number of scholars researched and developed theoretical frameworks for the different ways in which

contentious collective politics and social movements, including the Tea Party, used the new information and communication landscape.[19]

Other works deal exclusively or partially with Tea Partiers' and Donald Trump's obsession with anti-Obama conspiracy theories, the Tea Party's capturing of the Republican Party in the House of Representatives, Tea Partiers' (and evangelicals') crucial role in Trump's 2016 election victory, and Trump's political language.[20] While focusing on the 2020 presidential election, John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck, for example, present and interpret valuable public opinion survey data on the increased political polarization that started well before Trump's entry into the electoral arena.[21] The partisan conflict at the level of political leaders that penetrated into the level of the mass public has been well documented—and it has continued and is important to emphasize further and more fully (see chapter 5).

## A THEORY OF THE MASS-MEDIATED RISE OF THE TEA PARTY AND ANTI-OBAMA CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The main argument of *Hate Speech and Political Violence* is that political communication began to go into a toxic downward spiral when the Tea Party, a reactionary social movement, was hastily founded with the assistance of media insiders and conservative advocacy groups merely a month after Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States, was inaugurated. We argue and support with our research what we call the *interconnectivity of political communication* that facilitated and even promoted the Tea Party during its formative first years and the anti-Obama conspiracy theories that were embraced by its supporters. The rumor that Obama was not born in the United States and therefore an illegitimate president became part of the toxic communication spiral when the reality TV star and entrepreneur Donald Trump made himself the public spokesperson of the "birther" lies.

As figure 1.1 shows, the traditional mass media and the new social media platforms and websites along with the perennial personal communications are vehicles for the transmission of political messages to and from

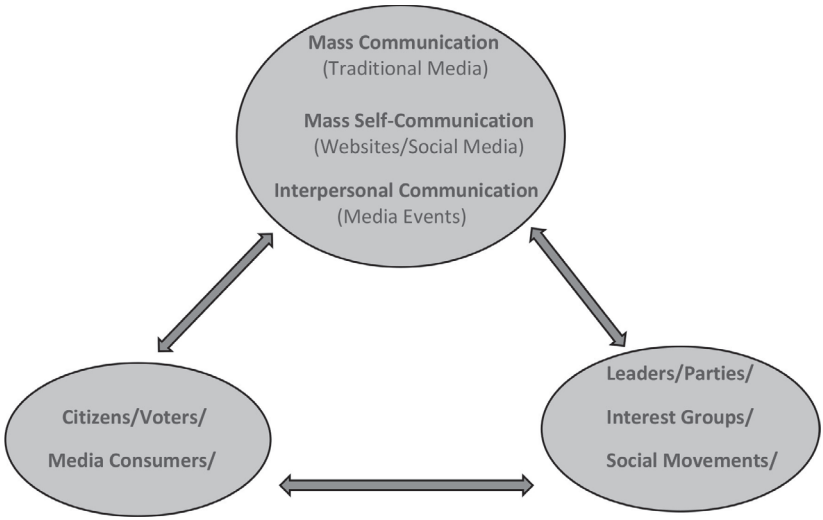


**FIGURE 1.1** The interconnectivity of political communication and the rise of the Tea Party and anti-Obama conspiracy theories.

organized political entities and leaders (right corner) and citizens and voters (left corner).

The communicators in all three communication modes are participants in the political communication loop. What Manuel Castells calls *mass communication* and *mass self-communication media* were crucial contributors to and disseminators of uncivil and even weaponized rhetoric during the rise of the Tea Party.[22] But a great many of these toxic messages originated in interpersonal communication on websites and in the form of media events that remain part and parcel of modern-day politics and that tend to be staged in search of news and social media attention. Originally analyzed by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, extraordinary media events, such as the public funerals of political leaders or the Olympic Games, required close organizational cooperation between governments and media organizations.[23] In the early stage of the Tea Party, the movement's activists organized mass protest rallies, often with the assistance and participation of Fox News's

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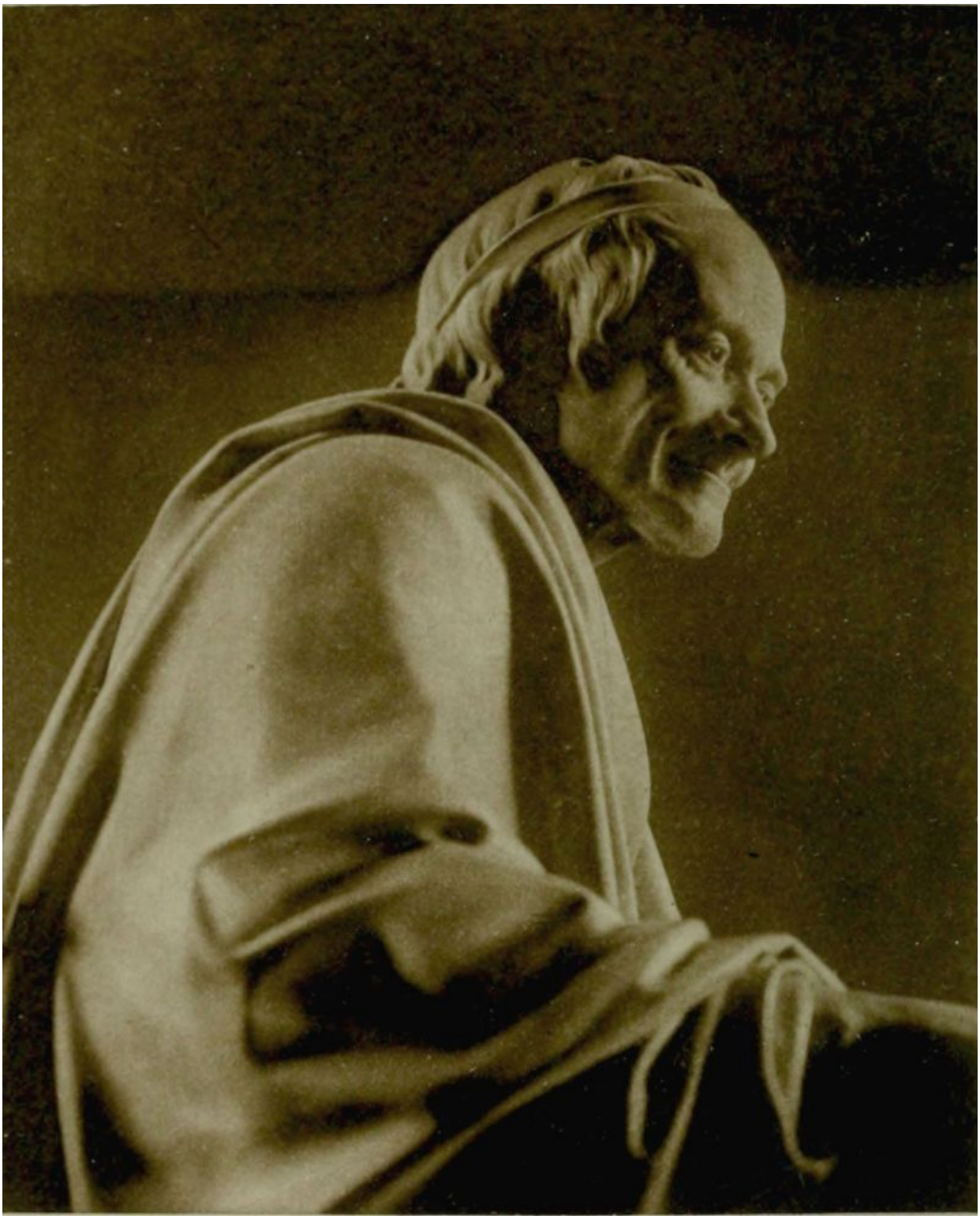

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from an Original Picture
given by herself
to the Countess of Sandwich
and by the present Earl
of Sandwich
to Mr Walpole 1757

back

AU ROY
ROY

back

back

GABRIELLE EMILIE DE BRETEUIL.
*MARQUISE DU CHATELET.*
Morte à Luneville en 1749, agée de 43 Ans.

*Peint par Marianne Loir.* *et Grave par P. G. Langlois, 1786.*

back

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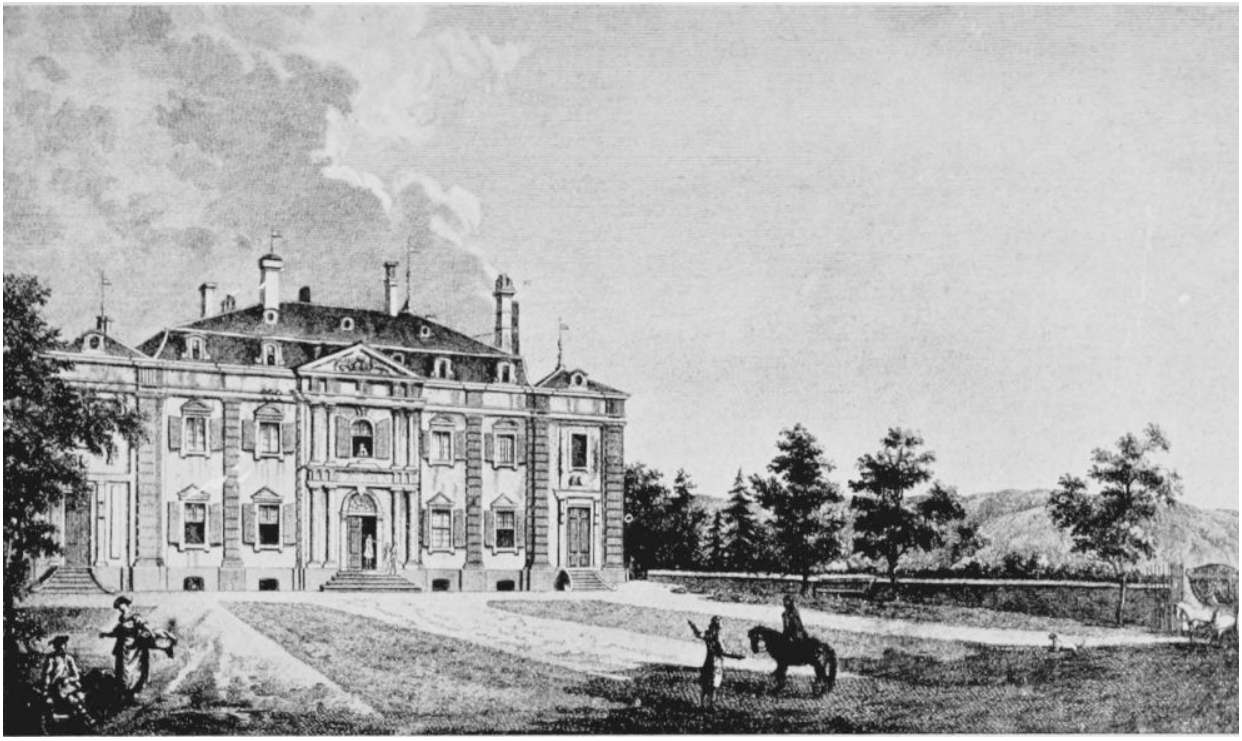
LE KAIN
Le voila donc connu, ce secret plein d'horreur !
Dédié, par l'Amour Filial,
aux Mânes de Henri Louis Le Kain,
Pensionnaire du Roi.

back



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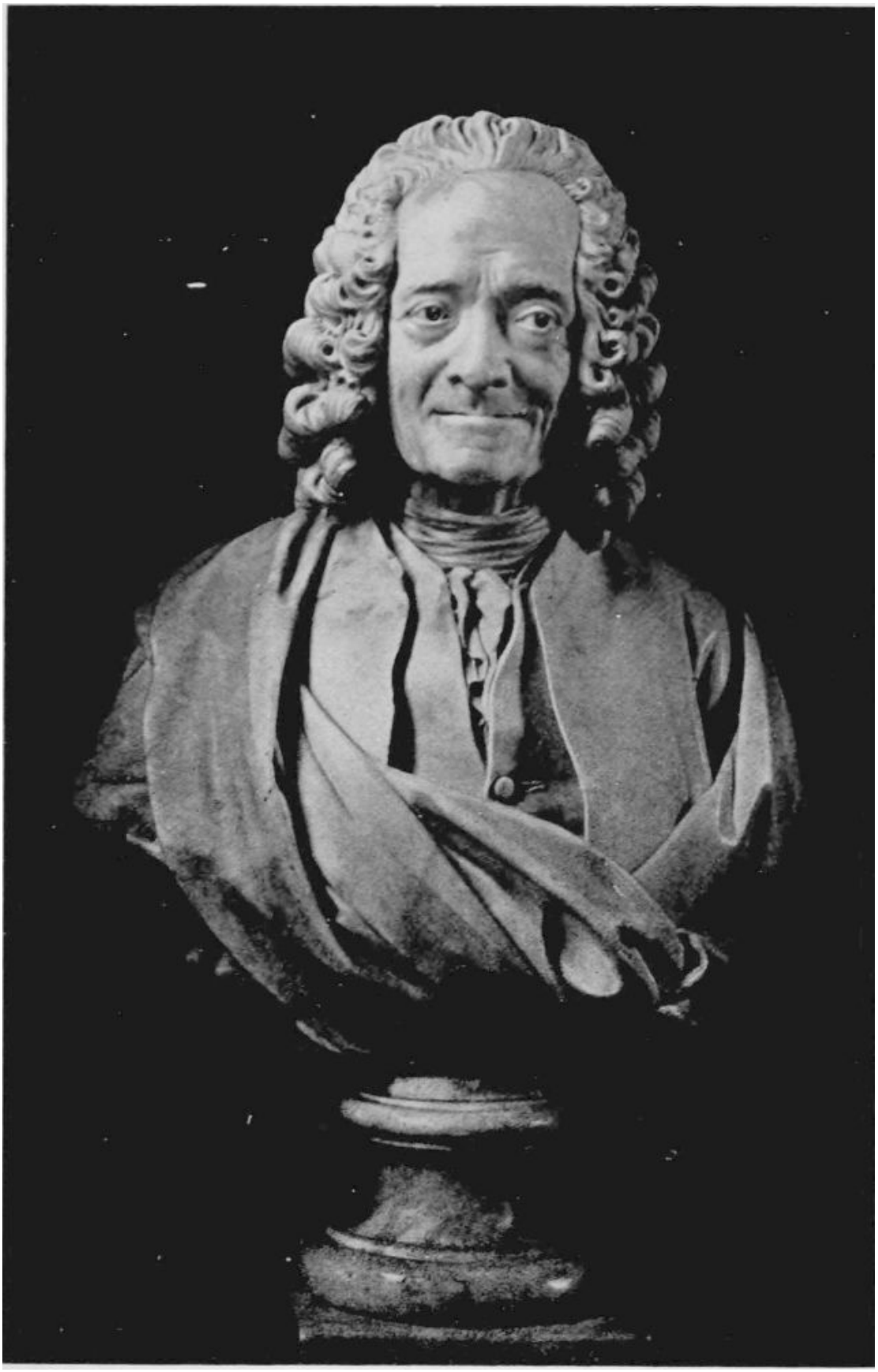

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